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READING SUBURBANIZATION AND PLACELESSNESS IN RICHARD YATES

By

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Thesis

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Reading Suburbanization and Placelessness in Richard Yates

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The themes of suburbanization and placelessness arise in many of Yates' novels, exposing the continuing pattern of "conformity at any price" which accompanied the rapidly-changing era of post-World War II America. As suburbanization began to take its toll on the American landscape, a new, increasingly placeless environment started to emerge; endless subdivisions of identical houses, commercial strip developments, shopping centers, and movie plazas sprang up, places which not only looked alike, but felt alike. A cultural shift accompanied this changing environment, one which embraced a new "domestic ideal" of the suburban family, an image constantly reinforced through the media of the time. Yates' characters, while on the surface conforming to this ideal, imagine breaking free from their mundane lifestyles, harboring visions of untapped "greatness" within themselves. Ultimately, however, they lack the autonomy or strength of character needed to accomplish this break. Having existed for so long in an empty, shallow environment providing possibilities only for commonplace and mediocre experiences, they must cling desperately to safety and security at any price.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 1: <i>COLD SPRING HARBOR</i>	12
CHAPTER 2: <i>REVOLUTIONARY ROAD</i>	31
CHAPTER 3: <i>DISTURBING THE PEACE</i>	50
CONCLUSION	6

## Introduction

Soon after the publication of his first novel, *Revolutionary Road*, Richard Yates gave an interview revealing the intention behind his writing:

I meant it . . . as an indictment of American life in the nineteen-fifties. Because during the Fifties there was a general lust for conformity over this country, by no means only in the suburbs – a kind of bland, desperate clinging to safety and security at any price. . . . I meant the title to suggest that the revolutionary road of 1776 had come to something very much like a dead end in the Fifties. (Bailey 231)

This theme arises in many of Yates' novels, exposing the continuing pattern of "conformity at any price" which accompanied the rapidly-changing era of post-World War II America. As suburbanization began to take its toll on the American landscape, a new, increasingly placeless environment started to emerge; endless subdivisions of identical houses, commercial strip developments, shopping centers, and movie plazas sprang up, places which not only looked alike, but felt alike. A cultural shift accompanied this changing environment, one which embraced a new "domestic ideal" of the suburban family, an image constantly reinforced through the media of the time. Yates' characters, while on the surface conforming to this ideal, imagine breaking free from their mundane lifestyles, harboring visions of untapped "greatness" within themselves. Ultimately, however, their environments have stripped them of the sense of autonomy or strength of character needed to accomplish this break. Having existed for so long in an empty, shallow environment providing possibilities only for "commonplace

and mediocre” experiences, they must cling desperately to safety and security at any price (Cresswell 79).

Margaret Marsh, a history scholar of the time period, explains the emergence of suburbanization during the late 1940s, citing the policies of the New Deal national government as its source, including increased highway building, mortgage guarantees, and the advent of greenbelt communities (155). By 1948, statistics for new housing construction for the first time surpassed pre-depression figures, due largely in part to the new assembly-line style of construction pioneered by the Long Island Levitt brothers. Most of these houses were located in the suburbs. Decreased building costs, combined with the sudden affluence of post-World War II America and an increasingly effective commuter railroad system, led to an unprecedented boom of suburban development: “If the nineteenth century could be called the Age of Great Cities, post-1945 America would appear to be the Age of Great Suburbs. As central cities stagnated or declined in both population and industry, growth was channeled almost exclusively to the peripheries” (Fishman 182).

These new suburbs, havens of the white, middle-class population, created a new ideal of family life, continually reinforced by the media of the time period: “Images of suburbia in the press, on television, and among scholars portrayed a close connection between a specific type of family life and a certain kind of environment. . . . By the time World War II ended, it seemed as if the suburb and the single-earner, nuclear family had always been two parts of a single idea ” (Marsh 5). This specific ideal of family life fostered social conformity; the suburbs were for stay-at-home mothers, commuting fathers, and well-behaved children only. Even the architecture of the suburbs promoted

conventionality. They boasted prefabricated cape-cod knockoffs or ranch houses, pastel “boxes made of ticky-tacky,” in the words of folk singer Malvina Reynolds, where all the people lived the same lives, and “all came out just the same” (Zinn 527). In reality, Reynolds appears to be saying, the picture post-card vision of the suburbs failed to live up to its name. As Mrs. Givings states in *Revolutionary Road*, the suburbs were the “enemy camp,” filled with “horrid little ranch houses and split levels, [containing] impossibly rude people whose children ran tricycles against your shins and spilled Kool-Aid on you” (Yates 153).

Accompanying the emergence of these bland, homogenous, “horrid little” communities, a dead-zone of what anthropologist Marc Augé refers to as “non-places” came into existence. These non-places, insidiously familiar-feeling and marked by their transient natures, consisted of spaces of circulation (subways, freeways, airports), consumption (bars, restaurants, office buildings), and communication (phone booths, movie theaters, radio stations). Surrounding the Revolutionary Hills Estate, for instance, is the “desolation of Route Twelve, with its supermarkets and pizza joints and frozen custard stands”(Yates 153), a “long bright valley of colored plastic and plate glass and stainless steel” (Yates 5). These areas of placelessness create look-alike landscapes, non-places which limit human interaction and make personal connections difficult. They “are seen only in terms of more or less useful features,” creating an environment where all experiences must necessarily remain “casual, superficial, and partial” (Relph 82). As Augé elaborates, non-places are “spaces in which individuals are supposed to interact only with texts,” and not with each other.

In *Cold Spring Harbor*, *Revolutionary Road*, and *Disturbing the Peace*, novels whose time periods span from the late 1940s to the early 1960s, Yates traces the increasing effects of placelessness and conformity on American culture, chronicling the lives of his characters as they attempt to overcome their stultifying environments. Ultimately, however, Yates speaks out against more than changing American landscape; he also records the weakness of character which the era fostered, the middle-class population's easy acceptance of the "rewards of suburban comfort" (Bailey 232). As one reviewer commented, "To read [Yates] is to have forced upon us a fresh sense of our critical modern shortcomings: failures of work, education, community, family, marriage . . . and plain nerve" (Bailey 229). Despite their unhappiness and their "dreams of potential greatness or adventure," the characters remain trapped in the mundane routines of their daily existence, unwilling or unable to leave the comforts of suburbia behind and strike out on their own (Bailey 232). Though Yates blames his characters for this lack of nerve, the effects of their environment must also be considered.

Yates' characters remain alienated from their environment, existing in a world of non-places which create, at best, only a temporary sense of attachment. Their homes, which Tim Cresswell refers to as the "foundation of our identity," fail to provide them with a sense of place or a feeling of being "rooted" to one spot (58). Instead, they remain strangers in their own houses, places which feel to them as temporary or transitional as hotel rooms. Evan Shepard's apartment comes "to look and feel uncannily like the place in Huntington . . . years ago" (*Harbor* 58). John Wilder's home remains foreign to him, a place where he drinks bourbon and sits "blinking in bewilderment," unable to relax or let down his guard (*Peace* 60). He feels more comfortable in his bachelor retreat on Varick



Street, a “dirt-cheap basement apartment . . . the kind supposed to be condemned by the city” (*Peace* 9). Although the sterilely-white, sparsely-furnished apartment is about as personal as a Motel 6, he feels just as comfortable in it as in his “high, bright apartment with its view of mid-town Manhattan towers” (*Peace* 1).

The world outside of their homes provides even fewer opportunities to find a sense of place. Frank Wheeler’s office building could be interchangeable with one of a hundred similar structures, standing in “an appropriately humdrum section of lower mid-town,” destined from the day of its grand opening to “settle deep into that smoke-hung clutter of numberless rectilinear shapes” (*Road* 69). All the restaurants which he frequents appear to be the same; entering one with his boss, he imagines it to be the place where he spent the most memorable afternoon of his childhood, yet he can’t quite be sure, since “there were several hotels of the size and kind in the neighborhood” (*Road* 195). Wilder can’t even distinguish between one heavily-frequented bar and another: “I’m having a drink at – Grand Central. The Biltmore,” he informs his wife. “No, wait: the Commodore. I’m having a drink at the Commodore” (*Peace* 2).

Unable to form a sense of place, either at home or in the outlying world, Yates’ characters are doomed to live their lives without forming a strong sense of self. As anthropologist Gabriel Marcel explains, “An individual is not distinct from his place; he is that place” (Cresswell 42). Edward Relph, the geographer largely responsible for the advent of placelessness studies, elaborates on this: “Place is the source of security and identity for individuals. . . . The need for roots is at least equivalent to the need for order, liberty, responsibility, equality, and security” (38). The Shepards, the Wheelers, and John Wilder all remain unable to feel “at home” in the world in which they live; they

daily experience placelessness in a very tangible way. Their personalities directly echo this fact; their characters remain weak, tractable, and, above all, commonplace.

Yates' bleak, realistic look at life earned him the respect of his fellow writers, but cost him, in a large part, popularity with the general public. He was viewed as too bleak, too honest, and too focused on the popular theme of suburbia to gain wide-spread favor. As Stuart O'Nan explains,

In the era that saw Pynchon, DeLillo and Rushdie make their names (before storming the bestseller lists), he wrote about the mundane sadness of domestic life in language that rarely if ever draws attention to itself. There's nothing fussy or pretentious about his style. If anything, his work could be called simple or traditional, conventional, free of the metafictionalists' or even the modernists' tricks. The only writer's writer he might be compared to would be Chekhov, or perhaps Fitzgerald, though without Fitzgerald's poetic flair. (1)

As an observer of the mundane aspects of American lives, Yates' work can also be compared to John Cheever, another unpretentious or "simple" writer. Since his death, his influence on the next generation of American writers can be clearly seen in the works of Tobias Wolff and Andre Dubus (two former students of his), as well as in the writings of Richard Ford.

As a largely biographical writer, Yates' characters reflect his own perceived shortcomings and personal disappointments. An inveterate alcoholic, twice-divorced and estranged from his children, Yates viewed his personal life as a failure. Plagued with depression and increasing mental instability, he spent a great deal of his adult life in Los Angeles, a city he hated but which provided him with a steady income writing for films

and television. Yates viewed both his environment and his job as stultifying, yet remained unable to make a living off of his writing or to find other, more rewarding employment. Like his characters, his life consisted of a constant struggle to negate the insipidness of his daily existence and to prove himself by succeeding in the literary world. His writing, which garnered high praise both from his contemporaries and from literary critics, never achieved the sort of fame which Yates desired or believed himself entitled to; his first novel, *Revolutionary Road*, would always be considered his best work. Through his characters, he expresses the frustration of his stymied career and unsuccessful personal life. Although, at times, the author appears to hate his characters, in reality his novels reflect his own self-loathing, expressing his ever-present feelings of disappointment and placelessness.

The daily routines of Yates' characters reflect their mundane personalities. Shepard spends his days in a nameless industrial unit, "punching a factory time clock, fondling his thermos bottle of coffee [and] doing mindless, underling things all day" (*Harbor* 59). April Wheeler, Frank's unhappy suburban housewife, remains trapped in her "sweet little" home, "pacing up and down the rooms of a dead-silent, dead-clean house and twisting her fingers at her waist until they ached" (*Road* 29, 111). Her husband, in the meantime, spends his days in "the dullest job you could possibly imagine," experiencing at "bright, dry daily ordeal" at the office of Knox Business Machines, the same company where his father worked for nearly his entire life (*Road* 80). Everyday, Yates' characters experience what Cresswell calls drudgery of place: "the places to which we are most committed," he explains, "may be the center of our lives, but may also be oppressive and imprisoning" (42).

Despite their daily existences, which offer proof to the contrary, the characters still believe they are in some way superior to the rest of their suburban counterparts, that *they*, at least, do not belong in the same prison as their neighbors or co-workers. As the Wheelers continually assure themselves, “They alone . . . were painfully alive in a drugged and dying culture,” a culture where “nobody thinks or feels or cares anymore; nobody gets excited or believes in anything except their own comfortable little God damn mediocrity” (*Road* 60). The Wheelers conveniently forget April is a housewife and Frank is a businessman, or that they live in a suburban development; somehow, in their minds at least, they are still superior to the Donaldsons or the Campbells or the Millers. Gloria Drake, Shepard’s mother-in-law, feels a similar sense of social elevation, continually attempting to reassure herself of her own greatness, despite the realities of her life: “If Harriet Talmage was surprised at first to find herself in this shabby room, with its insulation-board walls, it wouldn’t be long before she discovered what superior people they all were,” she thinks to herself (*Harbor* 148).

Feeling themselves superior to their neighbors, yet continuing to live average, commonplace lives, the characters find solace in harboring these thoughts of greatness. Some possess a clear vision of what this distinction would entail; Shepard dreams of becoming a mechanical engineer, insisting fiercely to himself and to others he is more than just a factory worker. Wilder, longing to prove himself as more than an advertising salesman, clings to the belief he remains destined to become a successful movie producer, “the man who gets the idea, raises the money, hires the talent, and puts the whole thing together” (*Peace* 98). April Wheeler, on the other hand, believes the only

way to escape her increasingly-intolerable, suburban lifestyle is to move abroad to Paris, where, magically, everything will be different.

Other characters, such as Frank Wheeler, harbor only vague visions of their latent greatness: “All he would ever need, it was said, was the time and the freedom to find himself. Various ultimate careers were predicted for him, the consensus being that his work would lie somewhere ‘in the humanities’” (*Road* 21-2). Despite the fact he holds no clear idea of what he wants to do with his life, Wheeler refuses to doubt his “own exceptional merit,” merely waiting for his greatness to somehow manifest itself (*Road* 22). Gloria experiences a similar situation, mocking the “barren little middle-class” people who surround her, while numbing herself with whiskey.

Liquor, in fact, appears to be the way in which most of Yates’ characters alleviate the underlying, rarely-acknowledged suspicion of their own mediocrity. Yates himself was an confirmed alcoholic, his drinking as widely-known as his talent. Wheeler, Gloria, and Wilder drink often and heavily, attempting to blot out the disappointment of their lives. All of the characters escape in another fashion as well, immersing themselves even more deeply into the world of non-place in an attempt to forget the realities of their daily existences. Instead of liquor, they escape through dark taverns, brightly-lit movie theaters, and long, empty stretches of highway, places where a blanket of anonymity covers their personal failures.

Unsurprisingly, untapped “greatness” of the characters never actually emerges; instead, like Yates’ own life, their lives end in various stages of failure. April Wheeler, sickened by her own cowardice, attempts a risky home abortion which leads to her death. Frank Wheeler ends as a parody of William Whyte’s *The Organization Man*: a slack,

bland version of his previous self, interested in talking solely about his job and his therapist. Gloria and Wilder experience mental breakdowns, while Shepard and his wife retreat so far into the world of placelessness that the idea of real, human connection appears all but impossible for them. Although Yates' characters blame their environments for the disappointments in their lives, they must also accept partial blame. By choosing to exist in such an environment, by giving in to the ease and comfort of routine and complacency, they have nailed their own coffins shut. In the end, it is not solely the suburbanization of America or the placelessness of their environments which leads to their failures; instead, it is their own fear, sense of complacency, and willingness to conform which is responsible for their fates. As Yates' biographer summarizes about *Revolutionary Road*, "When it comes to the point of leaving the 'hopeless emptiness' of it all – or even completing a stone path that would connect their home to Revolutionary Road – Frank, at least, would rather not" (232).

Turning to the first chapter, then, is an examination of *Cold Spring Harbor*, which traces the newly-emerging culture of suburbanization during the era of World War II. As Yates' younger protagonists struggle to find their place in an increasingly placeless environment, their parents vainly attempt to recapture the comfort of the familiar in a rapidly-changing landscape. Spanning the 1940s, the novel portrays the effects of a homogenizing culture which encourages neither greatness nor individualism, only mediocrity. Although suburbanization bears responsibility for a large portion of the characters' unhappiness, they ultimately remain unable to recognize the extent to which placelessness affects their lives; instead they choose to blame each other, estranging themselves not only from their environment, but from one another as well.

In *Revolutionary Road*, which the second chapter addresses, the characters appear all too familiar with the effects of suburbanization. Set in the 1950s, during the post-World War II economic boom, the novel follows the lives of a suburban husband and wife, showing the insidiousness of homogenization on the American culture. Although Frank and April Wheeler smugly denounce their neighbors, believing themselves immune to suburban conformity, they slowly find themselves assimilating into the very culture which they detest. The novel emphasizes the growing pressures which accompanied the rapidly changing culture of the time period; unlike the characters in *Cold Spring Harbor*, the Wheelers are acutely aware of the effects of suburbanization, yet find themselves unable to avoid assimilation. Disgusted with her weakness, April commits a form of suicide, while Frank becomes a hollow shell of a businessman, the very creature which horrified him most.

The third chapter shows how the consequences of assimilation are even direr for John Wilder, the protagonist of *Disturbing the Peace*. Set in the early 1960s, the novel shows the degree to which placelessness has taken over the American landscape. Wilder, unlike the Wheelers, possesses the strength of character to resist the comforts and familiarity of suburbanized culture, leaving his soulless job and estranged wife in a quest to find his hidden “greatness.” Despite his strength, however, Wilder still finds himself unable to escape the effects of placelessness, especially in a city such as Los Angeles. As the pressures to assimilate grow increasingly stronger, Wilder finds himself suffering breakdown after breakdown. At the novel’s close, he remains permanently installed in a mental institution, the epitome of non-place, all traces of individualism erased.

### *Cold Spring Harbor*

*Cold Spring Harbor*, one of Yates' final novels, traces the early effects of suburbanization and placelessness on the American middle-class. While his characters each harbor hazy visions of attaining greatness or achieving the American Dream, their hopes slowly dissolve beneath the reality of their everyday lives. The families exist in a place where the phrase "childhood home" now evokes a string of seedy apartment buildings, where radio programs have replaced conversation over dinner, and where the title of "Parts Control Supervisor" reflects the ultimate culmination of a man's career. Too weak to avoid assimilation into an increasingly homogenized culture, they find themselves leading painfully average existences, trapped in a world of unfulfilling jobs, unhappy marriages, and impersonal, pre-fabricated houses. As vague feelings of inadequacy compete with a growing sense of complacency, the characters find themselves slowly allowing their dreams to slip away, replaced by the temporary distractions which suburbanized America affords them. Unable to form real or lasting connections with either their surroundings or their families, they turn to movies, bars, automobiles, and other non-places in search of comfort, ultimately isolating themselves from both each other and the world at large. As the novel closes, the families fade away into a new American landscape, a landscape marked by its ever-increasing sense of placelessness.

Evan Shepard, the protagonist of *Cold Spring Harbor*, clearly demonstrates the consequences of the changing culture of World War II America. As the war effort increased, the country became exponentially more homogenous as the population became



pressured to “pull together.” Media of the time period constantly reinforced this pressure, as war films and radio programs portrayed brave fighting men and their supporting, stable families. Evan, rejected from the arm due to perforated ear drums and unhappy with his insipid wife and mother-in-law, finds himself unable to join in this sense of camaraderie. Instead, he spends his days repairing factory machinery and cheating on his current wife with his previous one, attempting to escape his ever-present feelings of disappointment and stagnancy. Although a brilliant machinist, Evan lacks the ability to move beyond his dead-end factory job; his dreams of becoming a mechanical engineer grow increasing far-fetched as the novel progresses, complacency sets in, and reality takes its course.

Married at eighteen to a girl he hardly knows, Evan suddenly finds himself saddled with a teenage wife and an infant daughter, doing unskilled work for apprentice wages. Although his life ostensibly reflects the American Dream of a home, a family, a job, and a car, he finds his daily life becoming increasingly oppressive:

Evan began taking long, aimless drives alone at night, so he could frown into the darkness and think. . . . Was this all there was ever going to be? And he would sock the steering wheel with the soft part of his fist, again and again, because he couldn't believe his life had become so fixed and settled before he'd even turned nineteen. (Yates 11)

Throughout, Evan's greatest fear remains mediocrity, of being “fixed and settled” in an unremarkable existence. Despite this fear, however, four years after his divorce finds him still working at the same factory machine-tool plant job, departing after dinner every night to drink at the same roadside bar with other factory employees. His father agonizes

over his son's predicament, wondering "if you lived like a proletarian long enough, among proletarians, weren't you almost certain to become a proletarian too?" (Yates 15).

Evan, harboring the same fears, begins making vague plans for his future, sending away for college brochures on mechanical engineering. This dream of college remains ever-present in the back of his mind, despite its increasingly impractical nature. The idea acts as a kind of buffer against his everyday existence, a way of proving, at least to himself, he *is* different. It signifies his desire for a different future, a future in which he will no longer be identified solely by the "badge clipped to the left breast pocket of his dark cotton twill" factory uniform, but by the strength of his own personality or accomplishments (Yates 75). This desire to stand out from the crowd reflects a nearly universal aspect of the American Dream, although, as Jim Cullen points out, the dream alone is not enough: "Agency . . . lies at the very core of the American Dream" (10). One must not simply *want*; one must *act*.

This distinction keeps Evan from moving beyond his mediocrity. Although he assures his father, and himself, that he remains intent on becoming a mechanical engineer, the entrance of Rachel Drake into his life causes him to push his dreams into the background without a second thought: "It wasn't until he was getting ready for bed . . . that a disconcerting question came into his mind: if he got married again, what about the mechanical engineering?" (Yates 37). Despite his reservations, he soon agrees to marry Rachel, clinging to the vague hope that "marriage and college wouldn't necessarily have to rule each other out" (Yates 37). With the engagement, however, Evan's short-lived sense of agency begins to dissipate; when Rachel's mother, Gloria, hears the news, she can't help thinking Evan looks "like a boy worn to fatigue and ready to give in, ready to

submit to the stubborn terms of a girl holding out for marriage. Well, okay, what the hell, his weary eyes seemed to say; why not?” (Yates 45).

Although he and Rachel still half-heartedly speak of college after their marriage, Evan finds himself spending most of his savings on a lavish apartment for Rachel. Yates’ biographer, Blake Bailey, remarks on the ease with which Americans in the 1940s found themselves substituting dreams for tangible realities:

The temptation was particularly keen to accept the easy rewards of suburban comfort, an undemanding job, and to fill the emptiness that followed with dreams of potential greatness or adventure. But to pursue such dreams in fact – as Yates well knew – required a resilient sense of autonomy that resisted the siren call of, say, a comfortable ranch house. (232)

Evan, much to his chagrin, does not possess the required strength of spirit to achieve his dreams of greatness. When his father comments on the impracticality of maintaining both the apartment and his intentions of enrolling in college, Evan can only hang his head in “a dumb, cowardly way” (Yates 56).

The announcement of Rachel’s pregnancy drives another nail into Evan’s “sumptuous, peach-colored” coffin (Yates 55). Realizing the improbability of proving himself as a mechanical engineer, he experiences a brief flare of excitement when, after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the Army draft board summons him for a physical examination. Evan, like countless other young men at the time, views the chance to serve abroad as a diversion from the disappointment of his everyday life. Although he maintains a lifestyle which many others would define as the pinnacle of the American Dream (home, wife, job, car, child on the way), the reality of his existence stultifies him.

He lives what Henri Lefebvre calls “the misery of everyday life”; tedious tasks, humiliations, preoccupations with basic necessities, hardships and avarice (Cresswell 42).

Although Evan’s second marriage has hardly begun, he already longs for escape: “It occurred to him, glancing around, that this ample apartment seemed to have shrunk. It had come to look and feel uncannily like the place in Huntington with Mary Donovan, years ago” (Yates 58). Longing to break away from the familiarity and drudgery of his home life, Evan imagines the “boisterous talk and laughter of the barracks” and the “rollicking nights in the bars and hotels of lost country towns” (Yates 57). Instead, he finds himself shunted out of the gymnasium, a 4-F form attesting to his unfitness to serve his country. Returning home to Rachel’s joyous greeting, Evan contemplates his situation: “Other men were saying goodbye to their wives all over the world . . . and when they came back . . . they might look at him as if he were scarcely worth bothering with. . . . One thing, therefore, was clear: they had better not find him like this . . . Something would have to be done” (Yates 59).

Evan never quite gets around to figuring out specifically what this “something” would involve, however. Before long, he finds himself renting a cheap, furnished house with his wife, his mother-in-law, and his brother-in-law, a house “similar to other cheaply built houses” with “makeshift” walls (Yates 67). The house brings to mind the ready-for-sale homes of Long Island entrepreneur Abraham Levitt, who invented a twenty-seven step assembly-line format in the early 1940s (Cullen 150-1). Not surprisingly, this rented, pre-fabricated house adds to Evan’s sense of restlessness; he works all day at a meaningless assembly-line job, only to return home to his meaningless, assembly-line

house, an “artificial household” which has seen countless families come and go (Yates 74).

In such a space, forming connections with other people remains all but impossible. Evan discovers he cannot even connect on any real level with his own daughter; on their bi-monthly visits, the days’ only activities involve driving up and down the coast, each of them staring out at the shore in silence. Evan’s one attempt to interact with his sixteen year old brother-in-law, in the form of a driving lesson, ends in disaster. The skilled, confident handling of cars marks the one part of his life which he has always excelled at, the one part which he controls: “You’re never nervous, are you,” Rachel comments early on in their courtship. “There’s such – authority in everything you do. Everything you do with the car, I mean” (Yates 32). Unable to pass even this one, seemingly-simple skill on to his brother-in-law fills Evan with disappointment. His failure to teach Phil to drive, much like his 4-F card, marks him, in his own mind, as inadequate; even in such a tiny way, he cannot make the slightest mark on the world. Driving back from the aborted lesson, he can no longer disillusion himself; he has no home of his own, no plans to attend college, a dead-end job, and a wife he doesn’t love. Even his teenaged brother-in-law realizes the hopelessness of his condition:

Phil knew there might not be much profit or future in hating your brother-in-law, but that didn’t mean you couldn’t figure him out and see him plain. This dumb bastard would never get into college. This ignorant, inarticulate, car-driving son of a bitch would never even be promoted to a halfway decent job. This asshole was going to spend the rest of his life on the factory floor with all the other slobs, and it would serve him right. Fuck him. (Yates 85)

Following his unsuccessful attempt to connect with Phil, Evan's frustration with his own mediocrity becomes more and more apparent. He begins to accept his circumstances with a sense of fatality, greeting the news of a possible promotion, which may finally afford him the opportunity to attend engineering school, with dull acceptance: "Parts-control supervisor' sounded as grindingly tedious as any other title [he] might bring home from the plant; and for that matter, even 'mechanical engineer' seemed scarcely a term to put stars in a girl's eyes" (Yates 78).

Yates' biographer comments on this grim and unavoidable acceptance of mediocrity which marks many of the author's novels: "To repeat the obvious, most people don't like reading about, much less identifying with, mediocre people who evade the truth until it rolls over them" (Bailey 553). While his novels explore the emptiness of suburbanized American culture, Yates intended to make it clear to his readers that it ultimately remains his characters, and not their environments, which cause their eventual downfalls. This reading appears too simplistic, however. Evan Shepard exists in a homogenized, increasingly placeless world which makes greatness difficult to achieve. Despite this, Evan must take on a portion of the blame; by accepting this homogenization, by giving in to complacency and settling for mediocrity, he allows his environment to slowly strip him of his strength of character, thus leading to his mediocrity.

Embarking on a pointless affair with his ex-wife in an attempt to break out from the pre-fabricated prison of his home life only exacerbates his frustration. More, the fact that Mary has attended college both shames and angers Evan: "What the hell else did you learn in college?" he taunts her, "How to read all these fucking books? How to make your bed six inches off the fucking floor?" (Yates 139). When Mary counters Evan's

anger by asking if he plans on being a mechanic his entire life, his response is telling. He first turns on her with anger: "I'm not a mechanic," he told her with a fierce pride of trade. "I'm a machinist'" (Yates 140). Yet, almost immediately, embarrassment swallows up his resentment, and he insists on telling her he "fully intended to go to college as soon as he could afford it" (Yates 140). Although Evan attempts to impress Mary by informing her of his future "plans," he cannot help his initial knee-jerk response, which reveals his true self-image. Evan does not see himself as a future mechanical engineer, despite his attempts at convincing both others and himself of this; instead, he sees himself for what he truly is: just another factory slob.

Facing the realization of his utterly average existence, Evan allows the college fantasy to fade away into the distance, turning back instead to the distractions of suburbanized America. He returns to his previous bachelor habits, going on aimless drives down abandoned stretches of Route 12, loitering at well-lit, identical-looking coffee shops, taking his daughter to big, cut-rate toy stores, and retreating to "old roadside taverns where he'd wasted so much time with other factory guys in the lost, drab years of living" (Yates 181). "Seated among strangers, alone and unobserved," Evan allows himself to fade away into the nameless, faceless, placeless landscape of modern America, a country in which you can be surrounded by people and yet completely alone (Yates 181).

This sense of placelessness and disappointment in no way remains unique to Evan; throughout the novel, his entire family displays symptoms of disillusionment and isolation. Gloria, his mother-in-law, attempts desperately to find a sense of place; as Yates comments, "She was ready to give her heart away to total strangers off the street"

(22). Even more so than Evan, Gloria's life constitutes one of temporality and placelessness. Her home consists of "a small, random apartment building," complete with a "sad living room, which smelled of cat droppings [and] recent cooking" (20). As Gloria informs Evan and his father, Charles, this small, random apartment building represents only the latest in a string of similar residences:

We've only been in this funny place a few months; this is just temporary. But then we've always moved around a lot; the children were saying just the other day they've lost count of all the different houses and apartments we've had. Can't remember how many places, or even how many towns; isn't that remarkable? No, we've always been very restless, you see. I suppose you could say we're vagabonds at heart. (Yates 22)

In the World War II era of *Cold Spring Harbor*, Gloria's transitory existence fails to meet the new, emerging standards of the suburban "good life." As Margaret Marsh comments, "Franklin Roosevelt may have agreed with Herbert Hoover on little else, but they held the same reverence for the single-family, owner-occupied house, cared for by a stay-at-home wife and paid for by the male breadwinner" (72). This happy suburban image found daily reinforcement in the press, the movies, the radio, and the television; by the mid-1940s, Gloria's outsider status as a divorced woman living in the city would be emphasized on a daily basis.

Upon meeting her for the first time, Evan and his father begin to understand the depths of loneliness which her lifestyle necessitates: "The Shepards were both ready to believe, this afternoon, that only a long-divorced woman would ever talk as if talking were sustenance" (Yates 23). Unsurprisingly, the news of Evan and Rachel's marriage



delights Gloria, mainly because of her fascination with Charles' life in Cold Spring Harbor. To Gloria, Charles represents the epitome of the American Dream; distinguished, respectable, and firmly entrenched in one place. As she muses, "Cold Spring Harbor was well known as a region of 'old money' – large or modest family fortunes husbanded through the generations – and the people there couldn't have asked for a more appropriate representative than Charles Shepard" (Yates 43). Charles appeals to her rootless nature, and she immediately latches on to both his life and his home as the apex of her dream. "Oh, I wish you'd tell me more about Cold Spring Harbor," she begs him. "Because do you know what I'd like to do someday? I'd really like to go out there and stay as long as I can" (Yates 44). Gloria, of course, does not mean for a visit; she plays for keeps.

Rachel's wedding fills her with excitement, not from happiness for her daughter, but since it affords her the brief opportunity to pretend as though she belongs somewhere. Like many of Yates' characters, Gloria's unhappiness stems not only from her environment, but from her belief that she deserves a special providence, that somewhere in her mediocre nature lies dormant greatness. She attempts to book the Episcopal Church for the ceremony, not because of any particular religious faith, but because "everybody knew it was the only aristocratic faith in America" (Yates 47). Gloria's obsession with aristocracy remains prevalent throughout the novel, demonstrating the depths of her placelessness; for Gloria, who has spent her entire life in transition, the idea of permanence reflects her ultimate desire. "Has your family all come from around here, then?" she asks Charles, "For generations?" (Yates 52). Her American Dream centers not on money or education or cars, but on the idea of "home."

As Relph explains, “The need for roots is at least equivalent to the need for order, liberty, responsibility, equality and security. . . . Home is the foundation of our identity . . . the dwelling place of being” (38). Gloria, who has never known this foundation, must clutch at what she can: Cold Spring Harbor. When Evan and Rachel settle in town, she jumps at the opportunity to join them, suggesting they rent a house together. “She’s dying to live in Cold Spring Harbor,” Rachel explains to her husband. “She’s really sort of – crazy. . . . All my life she’s kept coming up with some scheme for a new place to live every year, and I think she always really *has* believed it’d make everything happier for us, each time. Isn’t that crazy?” (Yates 65).

Although Rachel may view her mother’s actions as insane, what they honestly reflect is desperation. With every move, Gloria dreams of the opportunity to reinvent herself, to show the world that she *is* something special. When such a revelation fails to occur, she blames her environment for her failures, instead of her own inadequacies. As she explains to Charles and his wife over drinks, Pelham, a “barren little middle-class town” where she lived some years ago, allowed her no opportunity to prove her exceptional nature (Yates 152). Cold Spring Harbor, on the other hand, a place where “congenial” people such as Charles Shepard live, provides her with a new opportunity to prove her self.

Although living near the Shepards allows Gloria the chance to interact with Charles, she finds interaction with her son-in-law increasingly difficult. Evan’s affinity for automobiles directly connects him to placelessness; cars symbolize mobility and transition, Gloria’s worst fears. As she states to Evan and Charles on their very first chance meeting, “Well, of course I don’t drive . . . so I’ve never understood anything

about cars, but I know they're terribly complicated – *and* terribly dangerous” (Yates 21). Gloria refers not only to the physical dangers associated with cars, but to the emotional ones as well; true, cars may transport people *to* each other, but they also carry people *away*. Evan's attempt to teach Phil to drive frightens Gloria; once Phil has a car, he will be able to leave at will. “I know I'm a foolish woman, but I'm terrified of cars. I've always been terrified of cars,” she reiterates. “You *will* be careful, Evan, won't you?” (Yates 81). As usual, Gloria clutches a drink in her hand while saying this. For Evan, automobiles lessen the disappointments in his life by allowing him one, small arena in which he excels beyond the norm; for Gloria, alcohol acts in the same fashion.

Bourbon helps to smooth out the rougher edges of Gloria's life. Blurring the lines between truth and reality allows her to deny her disappointment and unhappiness. Although her life may not measure up to her expectations, alcohol helps her to pretend otherwise. Even without alcohol, Gloria remains adept at altering her perceptions to fool herself, relying on “a neat, nearly automatic trick of her mind for adjusting to minor disappointments. When you opened the bright wrappings of some meager or poorly chosen gift, you simply let you mind tell you it was just what you wanted” (Yates 51). Although the house she shares with Evan and Rachel can be described only as ramshackle, because she needs to, Gloria convinces herself the house fulfills her exact desires.

As demonstrated by Charles, Gloria finds herself drawn to families she describes as “congenial,” code for aristocratic. Surrounding herself with such people affords Gloria the opportunity to pretend that others see her in the same light. When she first meets Charles, she thinks to herself the “afternoon would be unforgettable, always, because

Charles Shepard was the most congenial person she'd met in years" (Yates 29). Later, she attaches the same moniker to Flash Ferris, a school acquaintance of Phil's: "Certain things about Flash Ferris . . . suggested at once that his people had money; and here in Cold Spring Harbor it might easily turn out to be the kind of 'old money' that figured so importantly in her yearnings" (Yates 90). "*You* listen," she informs her son, "if we have an opportunity to meet a few congenial people out here, I'm not going to let you spoil it for the rest of us" (Yates 91). For Gloria, the Ferris' wealth has little to do with her desire to court their friendship; instead, she feels drawn to the idea "old money" for the stability and permanence which it implies, the "familiarity of knowing and being known in a particular place" (Relph 38).

Harriet Talmage's (Flash's grandmother's) house, which she views as "probably her ancestral home" inspires Gloria to a "near-whisper of reverence, as if they were in church" (Yates 93). Religion holds no sway over Gloria, who almost accidentally smokes at Rachel's wedding; only the idea of permanence or sense of place inspires her to reverence. Her desire for this sense of permanence becomes blatantly obvious in Gloria's conversation. She describes Charles as coming "from an old north shore family" and though she claims "*I'm* the only real outsider," she stresses her ability to "feel at home almost anywhere, as long as I'm among congenial friends. . . ." (Yates 96). The lingering pause at the end of the sentence signifies the depths of Gloria's emotions; as she trails slowly off, her desire to be embraced into the Talmage's world becomes brutally apparent. Unfortunately, the afternoon's gathering also makes the impossibility of such an occurrence equally obvious. Gloria is left with a "sad, telltale display of cigarette ashes on the oriental rug beside her chair . . . looking very tired" (Yates 100). Despite her

best efforts, she appears to realize that she will never find a home in this world; she simply doesn't belong.

When Harriet, pestered by her grandson, drops in to Gloria's house for a surprise visit, Gloria's first response is to feel "a little frightened" (Yates 148). Although she attempts to convince herself that "if Harriet Talmage was surprised to find herself in this shabby room, with its insulation-board walls, it wouldn't be long before she discovered what superior people they all were," the woman's visit only serves to reiterate Gloria's feeling of inadequacy (Yates 148). Unlike Harriet, who possesses the trick of "finding her ease almost anywhere," Gloria remains consistently out of place, even in her own home: "They wanted to make her feel alone in the world, and they might as well have been trying to kill her. But she could still fight for her life in the only way she knew: she started talking again" (Yates 148, 147). All her life, she has believed that, given the chance, she could prove herself to be exceptional; now, face to face with the opportunity, she can only chatter on in "drink-thickened monologues," drowning her guest's polite chuckles with the "heavy rhythms of her own laughter" (Yates 152). Harriet's visit marks her final chance at finally proving her worth to the world; when pressed, however, Gloria discovers she has nothing to show. She is, as one reviewer of *Cold Spring Harbor* bluntly sums up, "a pitiful loser," sliding passively into "poverty, alcoholism, blindness and lunacy" (Bailey 550).

As the reality of her situation, and of her unexceptional nature, begins to present itself to Gloria, her "trick" of pretending to be happy slowly becomes less and less effective. In response, she turns more frequently to alcohol: "Years ago . . . having a hangover could be almost as much of an adventure as drinking itself. . . . Age and

loneliness had spoiled all that” (Yates 138). Her loneliness and sense of not belonging dominates Gloria’s existence. Even with others, she feels alone: “[She and Charles] were riding together into Huntington now on the slick, buoyant seat of the cab, in bright sunshine, and the funny part was that Gloria could have sworn she was still alone at the kitchen table with her medicine” (Yates 159). Tellingly, it is in the back of a taxicab, perhaps one of the most transitory non-places of all, in which Gloria honestly starts to understand the permanence of her impermanence. Even sitting directly next to the one man in the world she admires most, Gloria can forge no sense of connection with him or her surroundings.

Arriving at the hospital to view her new grandchild, Gloria’s grip on reality becomes increasingly tenuous. Rachel’s phrase “We’ll never let him feel he doesn’t have a home” finally breaks her, and she descends into a fevered rant (Yates 161). “Listen,” she wildly informs Rachel, “do you want to know why you and your brother’ve [sic] never had a home? . . . You’ve never had a home . . . because your father is a coward and a coward and a coward” (Yates 162-3). Although she accuses her husband of cowardice, it ultimately remains her own fear which has damned her to a life of instability. Yes, Gloria’s life has mainly been spent in the placeless nether-land of furnished houses and rented apartments, yet countless others have spent their lives in a similar fashion with contentment. After all, Gloria herself holds the blame for her family’s perpetual state of transition; if not for her overwhelming desire to prove herself exceptional, she could have settled in any number of places and forged a sense of home. By choosing to blame the mundane state of her environment, however, she attempts to avoid self-realization of her

own average nature. By claiming she doesn't belong in "barren, little, middle-class towns," she attempts, unsuccessfully, to negate her barren, little, sub-middle-class life.

Raised in the same environments as Gloria, her daughter, Rachel, also experiences a similar sense of placelessness. Unlike her mother and her husband, however, Rachel possesses no desire of proving herself extraordinary; instead, raised on a steady diet of media-marketed mass values, her sense of placelessness manifests itself in a longing for nothing more than cultural conformity and a chance to achieve the widely-published "American Dream" portrayed in movies and on television.

As Relph explains, placelessness was not a novel concept at the time, but the mass-production of the thirties and forties did bring about a new "culture of mass values – formulated by manufacturers, governments, and professional designers – guided and communicated through mass media" (92). Relph supports his theory by explaining the immense impact which newspapers, journals, radio, and television had on the American landscape, reducing the need for face-to-face contact, freeing communities from their geographical constraints, and therefore reducing the significance of place-based communities (91). In a country where one can walk into "any movie house, anywhere," and watch the same picture, the need to identify with *one* specific place becomes drastically reduced.

Having spent her entire life constantly moving between one rundown apartment building and another, Rachel's experience in making or maintaining real friendships remains almost nonexistent. Instead, she turns to media (radios, televisions, movies, magazines), or what Augé refers to as spaces of communication, in order to make connections. Deprived of actual human contact, Rachel views her life as though on a

movie screen; she attempts to live up to the vision of the American Dream which countless entertainment mediums have presented to her. At home, she listens to wholesome, family-orientated radio programs, such as *The Ozzie and Harriet Show* or *The Lux Radio Theater* (Smith 47). These programs reinforced the image of a stable, romantic marriage and comfortable home life. In theaters, movies such as *The Best Years of Our Lives*, *Mom and Dad*, and *The Easter Parade* continued to flaunt these visions of domesticity (Smith 51).

These spaces of communication provide Rachel not only with a blue-print of what “a happy home” should look like, but also serve as an escape from the tedium and loneliness of said happy home:

The movies were wonderful because they took you out of yourself, and at the same time they gave you a sense of being whole. Things of the world might serve to remind you at every turn that your life was snarled and perilously incomplete, that terror would never be far from possession of you heart, but those perceptions would nearly always vanish, if only for a little while, in the cool and nicely scented darkness of any movie house, anywhere. (Yates 88)

The numbing, impersonal effect of such places appears obvious as the Drakes emerge from the theater into “the blinding streets of reality,” wherein one must “find some way to face whatever [is] left of the afternoon [without losing] the comforts of artifice any sooner than necessary” (Yates 89).

For Rachel, these artifices function less as a form of entertainment and more as a form of necessity, an attempt to escape the disappointment of her married life. Over dinner, the radio replaces actual conversation, reducing the need for physical or verbal



contact: “*Death Valley Days* came on at seven o’clock, dinnertime . . . and that meant there could be no talk at all at their table as the two of them soberly fed themselves and listened to the little plastic Philco” (Yates 63). This program, Rachel’s favorite, contributes to her sense of detachment. “It really isn’t just a bunch of cowboy stuff,” she argues with Evan, “they’re very good, well-written little radio plays” (Yates 63). Rachel’s attachment to the show’s characters evokes Augé’s explanation of spaces of communication: “Certain places exist only through the words that evoke them, and in this sense are non-places” (96). Instead of choosing to live in reality, with her disappointing husband, Rachel prefers a world of fictional non-place, whose characters provide entertainment without demands.

After she and Evan move in with her mother, Rachel depends even more on the program to provide an outlet from the exasperations and let-downs of daily life. Despite her mother’s tipsy protestation of “Well; personally, I’ve always thought the dinner hour was for conversation,” she ignores her to focus on the radio (Yates 86). “Nothing, clearly, was going to spoil Rachel’s enjoyment of [the program] tonight. Absorbed in the opening lines of radio dialogue, she tucked into her meat and potatoes with the look of a girl determinedly at peace” (Yates 86).

The portrait of family life which has been offered up to Rachel on the silver screen looks nothing like her actual reality: her sumptuous peach-colored apartment has faded into a ramshackle, tarpaper-shingled clapboard, while her smiling, college-bound husband has morphed into a sullen, silent adulterer. And yet, as her marriage dissolves around her, Rachel finds herself unable to communicate with her husband; instead of dealing with her reality, she continues to cling to the mass-produced vision of happiness

which the media has provided her with: “Rachel was alone in the living room that evening, seated comfortably under a good lamp with a sewing basket that might have been chosen as a prop to make her seem the very picture of a contented young wife” (Yates 137). Even if her life provides no actual sense of contentment, she’s seen enough movies to fake it. After a particularly spunky performance in front of her father-in-law, in which Rachel claims to have never been happier, even her mother cannot help thinking “that she’d never heard quite such a silly claim to personal well-being except in Academy Award ceremonies on the radio” (Yates 146).

In the end, however, Rachel’s fantasy cannot withstand the reality of her marriage and home life. As Evan brutally informs her, “You really think anything’s ever been ‘fair’ in the world? Because listen, kid, I’ve got news for you. There *is* no fair” (Yates 180). In a fair world, Yates appears to imply, Rachel’s longing for a happy home and family would be attainable. In the real world, her happiness depends on Evan and Gloria, who are both too wrapped up in their struggles to avoid their mundane realities to even notice her. Unable to cope with an existence that does not fit the mass-produced vision of happiness which Rachel has been raised on, she retreats into an alternate world of placelessness, devoid of any real, human connections. Like Evan and her mother, Rachel ends the novel alone and adrift, another victim of the new American landscape.

### *Revolutionary Road*

In *Revolutionary Road*, Yates continues his exploration of placelessness in post-WWII America, tracking the lives of a young, married couple living in the “perfectly dreadful new development” of Revolutionary Hill Estates (*Ploughshares* 29). Written in 1961, at the height of the post-war exodus from the cities, the novel depicts the increasing effects of suburbanization on Frank and April Wheeler. Like the characters of *Cold Spring Harbor*, the Wheelers believe they are destined for something more than the material coarseness of their everyday lives, holding themselves above their suburban counterparts. As the novel progresses, however, Yates traces the couple’s growing estrangement, as the insidious nature of homogenizing culture takes its course. Fearing their descent into conformity and mediocrity, the couple, to varying degrees, attempts to rebel against their changing lifestyle; ultimately, however, they must face their own inadequacies and succumb to their environment.

Even as April struggles against the unfulfilling emptiness of the suburban domestic ideal, embarking on a bold plan to move the family to Paris, her inertia and fear cause her to buckle beneath the weight of her husband’s protests; she finally abandons the idea, opting instead to risk a fatal home abortion. As April rebels against existing in an increasingly placeless environment, a “long bright valley of colored plastic and plate glass and stainless steel,” Frank finds himself retreating further and further into this world, embracing the comforts of homogeny and conformity (Yates 5). Although he continues to echo his wife’s contempt of their surroundings, routinely and loudly condemning their house, his job, and the role of “dumb, insensitive suburban husband,” his own fear of change and sense of general complacency eventually leads him to

embrace the very life which he publicly denounces (Yates 25). With his wife's death, Frank finds himself retreating entirely into this world of non-place, becoming the epitome of *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*; by the novel's end, he remains nothing more than a bland version his former self, a man "so damned mild . . . he wasn't even alive" (Yates 330).

Frank Wheeler's sense of displacement becomes overtly apparent in the opening pages of Yates' novel, during his wife's first performance of Robert Sherwood's *The Petrified Forest* in the newly-established community theater group. The play is aptly chosen; the story of young diner worker, trapped in an environment she despises and longing to flee to France mirrors April's own fears and desires. Watching her from the audience, he cannot help feeling disappointment, both with her performance on the stage, and with his life off of it: "The trouble was that all afternoon in the city, stultified . . . he had drawn strength from a mental projection of scenes to unfold tonight" (Yates 13). All day at work, he imagines rushing home to swing his children about, gulping down a quick cocktail, and driving his tense but lovely wife to the school gymnasium, where her performance will wrap with thunderous applause. "Nowhere in these plans," however, does Frank foresee "the weight and shock of reality; nothing had warned him that he might be overwhelmed by the swaying, shining vision of a girl he hadn't seen in years . . . and that then before his very eyes she would dissolve and change into the graceless, suffering creature whose existence he tried every day of his life to deny" (Yates 13). This shock of reality strikes a chord in Frank; watching his wife's humiliation on stage, he cannot help examining his failures within his own life.

Driving April home from the gymnasium, Frank struggles to recapture, or even to remember, who he was before his marriage, when “time and freedom” were all he would need to find himself (Yates 21). While Evan Shepard, the protagonist of *Cold Spring Harbor*, dreams of nothing further than a mechanical engineering degree, enough to distinguish him from his fellow factory workers, Frank views himself as exceptional, as having the potential to become a “great man.” Traversing the brightly-lit pavement of Route 12, however, he realizes this potential has slowly faded with time. His “early and permanent withdrawal to Europe” has never transpired (Yates 22); the “great hulking split levels, all in the most nauseous pastels” which line his way home make this fact abundantly clear (Yates 29).

As the novel progresses, the reasons behind Frank’s thwarted ambitions crystallize; he has never succeeded in reaching his potential because he has always taken the easy way out. Before his marriage, fancying himself an “intense, nicotine-stained Jean-Paul-Sartre sort of man,” he takes it for granted he will end up with an “intense, nicotine-stained Jean-Paul-Sartre sort of woman” (Yates 23). Instead, he finds himself settling on April, not because she challenges him or appeals to his intellect, but because of her “shining hair” and “splendid legs” (Yates 23). When April’s first pregnancy occurs seven years too soon, rather than considering her idea of abortion, an idea he finds “more than a little attractive,” he dismisses it out of hand. Frank feels no moral outrage at the idea of the abortion; his anger stems from the fact April has planned it on her own: “Whatever you felt on hearing the news of conception . . . wasn’t it supposed to be something the two of you shared?” (Yates 48).

This concept of “togetherness” played an important role in the suburbanization of America. As Marsh explains, “The ‘togetherness’ of the 1950s, as seen through the eyes of journalists and critics, included male participation in [domestic affairs]” (186). Men, or at least suburban men, were expected to help with the children and the household chores and to participate in a social life with their spouses. April’s independence does not fit in this packaged notion of domesticity, a fact which makes Frank uncomfortable. Despite his own misgivings, he convinces April to have the baby. This step marks the first in a series of increasingly conformist choices. From that point on, as Frank muses the day after his wife’s stage performance, his life had become a “succession of things he hadn’t really wanted to do”: a dull job to prove his responsibility, an overpriced apartment, another child to prove the first one wasn’t a mistake, and a house in the country, solely because it marks the next logical step (Yates 51).

At the time of the novel’s action, then, the reader finds Frank living out the result of these earlier choices. Although he claims to hate his job, his home, and his role as a suburban husband, Frank’s assimilation into suburban culture can easily be seen. Although he mournfully bemoans his situation to his wife and his neighbors, “wistfully” talking of Europe and declaring “God, I wish we’d taken off and gone there when we had the chance,” April’s suggestion of moving to France immediately strikes fear within him. While this move would finally provide him with the opportunity of using his latent potential, perhaps even of becoming a “great man,” Frank remains unable to trade in the comfort of routine for the uncertainty of the unfamiliar. Yates explains this inability to act: “[Frank] may have thought the suburbs were to blame for all their problems, but I

meant it to be implicit in the text that that was *their* delusion, *their* problem, not mine” (Bailey 231). Despite Frank’s loud and oft-repeated complaints, Yates’ implies he has only himself to blame for his failures, both at home and in the office. This contention remains only partially true, however. Frank bears responsibility for succumbing to comforts of suburbia, an environment that fosters complacency and routine. At the same time, however, he cannot be held accountable for the insidiousness of placelessness, or the extent to which suburbanization changes him.

Frank views his job as just that, a job, and nothing more, taking great pleasure in making this fact known to his companions; he refers to his work as “what he liked to call ‘the dulllest job you can possibly imagine’” (Yates 13). As Frank explains to one of his friends when taking the job, “The thing I’m most anxious to avoid is any kind of work that can be considered ‘interesting’ in its own right. I want something that can’t possibly touch me” (Yates 75). Knox Business Machines, a sprawling, bloated corporation where, ironically, his father spent most of his life, at first appears to be a perfect place for Frank to work temporarily while he “finds” himself. As time rolls on, however, the joke begins to wear thin. The “absurd discrepancy” between his ideals and those of Knox Business Machines begins to dwindle (Yates 77); before long, Frank forgets about his ideals and finds a “secret, astringent delight” in the place (Yates 76).

This delight marks the salient point of Frank’s personality which keeps his potential for greatness perpetually buried; while he may possess an above average intelligence, his sense of adventure remains woefully underdeveloped. Frank may live on Revolutionary Road, but nothing about his thoughts or actions suggest anything vaguely revolutionary. Instead, he finds it easier to merely project the image of independence,

complaining about his life instead of attempting to change it: “For all of his complaints . . . he was sometimes guiltily aware of taking a dim pleasure in the very discomfort of the office. . . . In all honesty, he could not have denied a homely affection for the place itself, the Fifteenth Floor. . . . It was a part of him” (Yates 80). This identification with his office, a non-place of maze-like cubicles and fluorescent lights, marks the extent of Frank’s assimilation into the rapidly homogenizing suburban world of the 1950s.

Like Evan Shepard, Frank’s world consists almost entirely of one placeless space or another. His office, where he spends eight hours in a “bright, dry, daily ordeal,” encourages only conformity and routine, never individualism (Yates 80). He walks around like an “automaton,” connecting with his co-workers only through quick coffee-breaks or alcohol-soaked lunches. And yet, over time, Frank begins to take comfort in this very emptiness which distinguishes non-places. When entertaining his friends or his wife, he feels as though he must speak out against the new emerging culture of the 1950s, rehashing the “endlessly absorbing subject of Conformity, or The Suburbs, or Madison Avenue, or American Society Today” (Yates 59). In the placeless, homogenized atmosphere of his office building, however, such resistance is not necessary, or perhaps not even possible.

Despite his ostensible agreement to April’s plan of relocating to Europe, Frank cannot escape his connection to the office. After a brief period of “joyous derangement” in which he feels elevated from his co-workers and surroundings, he launches himself even further into the world of placelessness and mundane routine (Yates 119). Although he tries to tell himself “none of [the office concerns] mattered any more,” he remains unable to truly believe this fact (Yates 125). In an attempt to convince himself, he finds



himself telling others of the plan, basking in the glow of superiority which the recital brings him. By replacing actions with words, by *talking* about their move to Paris instead of actually *thinking* about the reality of it, Frank escapes the fear which accompanies the idea. Meanwhile, he finds himself submerging deeper and deeper into his familiar office routine, unable to truly believe he will be leaving in the fall: “He would sometimes find his mind sliding readily into gear with the slow machinery of Bandy’s projects before it occurred to him to think: No, wait a minute – I won’t even be *here* then. At first these little shocks had been fun, but the fun of them had worn off and soon they had become distinctly troubling” (Yates 168-9).

At home, the reality of their move exists as fact, with April’s forceful personality reminding him of it at every turn; at work, however, the plan dissolves into nothing more than a dream:

Everyone and everything in the office conspired against it. The stolid or tired or mildly sardonic faces of his colleagues, the sight of his IN basket and his current work pile, the sound of his phone or of the buzzer that meant he was wanted in Bandy’s cubicle – all these seemed to constantly tell him he was destined to stay here forever. (Yates 168)

While Frank may blame destiny for his inability to move beyond the familiar, Bailey hits upon the true reason for his failure: “In a society where one’s status depends almost entirely on the nice house and ‘good’ job, one must possess a formidable sense of self-worth . . . to risk failure by leaving the beaten path. Frank Wheeler, like most, would prefer to believe he’s special without putting the matter to the test” (233).

This reluctance to leave familiar territory extends beyond Frank's job and into his home life, where the mundane placelessness of his office finds replacement in his dull suburban house. Like the rest of his life, the purchase of the house reflects another compromise, another few steps down the beaten path. Suddenly saddled with two children they never wanted in the first place, their decision to move from the city to the suburban "country" demonstrates a common-place occurrence during the 1950s. As Marsh explains, "The new suburbs, lushly landscaped, safe, homogenous, and purged of the poor, the radical, and the ethnically suspect, offered seemingly foolproof environments for raising model children" (91). Ill-prepared for children they didn't want in the first place, April and Frank view their move to the suburbs as not only the next reasonable step, but as reassurance they are, in fact, good parents, doing what's best for their children.

When searching for a house, the Wheelers first look for "a small remodeled barn or carriage house, or an old guest cottage – something with a little charm" (Yates 28). On being informed that everything with "a little charm" is long gone, however, they settle on a "sweet little house" built immediately after the war and bordering the Revolutionary Hill Estates. These estates evoke Marsh's description of a lushly landscaped and homogenized suburbia: "It was invincibly cheerful, a toyland of white and pastel houses whose bright, uncurtained windows winked blandly through a dappling of green and yellow leaves" (Yates 323). Surrounding this toyland, however, exists proof of the encroaching real world, the interconnected sprawl of consumerism and non-places, "the desolation of Route Twelve, with its supermarkets and pizza joints and frozen custard stands . . . KING KONE, MOBILGAS, SHOPORAMA, EAT" (Yates 153).

Eventually, the couple settles on a small, wooden structure “riding high on its naked concrete foundation,” located just outside the Revolutionary Hills Estates (Yates 29). Although the home may differ slightly from the tacky-tacky houses of the neighboring development, it conforms to the cheap, ubiquitous architecture of the time period, complete with a picture window. “The architecture of the new suburbs was nostalgic; ersatz colonial and ‘cape cod’ styles abounded, styles that Frank Lloyd Wright had once lumped together as ‘codfish colonials’” (Marsh 185-6). The picture window reflects this insincere and widely-prevalent architecture, unmistakably marking the house as “suburban.” While Frank theorizes, “I don’t suppose one picture window is necessarily going to destroy our personalities,” this optimistic statement foreshadows ominous changes to come (Yates 29).

Despite April’s proclamation that “skillful arrangement of the furniture would counteract the prim suburban look of this too-symmetrical living room,” Frank finds the very symmetry “undeniably appealing,” marking the degree of his incorporation into non-places (Yates 30). As time goes on, the house remains a largely placeless environment: “The other pieces of furniture in the house had indeed removed the suggestion of primness, but they had failed to replace it with any other quality” (Yates 31). Only the television alcove shows signs of life; the purchase of the television suggests even further complacency of the Wheelers; as April convinces Frank, “Why not? Don’t we really owe it to the kids? Besides, it’s silly to go on being snobbish about television” (Yates 31).

Recognizing the placeless nature of his home, Frank treats his time there much like the time he spends at the office, busying himself with mindless work, such as building a stone path down from his front door to the road. Despite its thankless nature,

the task provides him with a sense of accomplishment, as he persuades himself he is happy with his choices in life: “At least, squatting to rest on the wooded slope, he could look down and see his house the way a house ought to look on a fine spring day. . . . The frail white sanctuary of a man’s love, a man’s wife and children” (Yates 45). Even as Frank recognizes the placelessness and impersonality of his home, he cannot help feeling attachment, and even affection for it. Gazing down at the structure, he sees how a house “ought to look,” a vision which reinforces the suburban ideal to which he has become irrevocably connected.

As the novel progresses, Frank grows increasingly comfortable with this suburban ideal, forgetting almost entirely his objections to the place; “the furniture that had never settled down and never would, the shelves on shelves of unread or half-read or read-and-forgotten books that had always been supposed to make a difference and never had [and] the loathsome, gloating maw of the television set” all take on a kind of peaceful comfort. Its picture window, its feeling of emptiness, and its location all cease to matter to him; instead he finds comfort in the house’s very trappings of suburban homogenization. So what, he appears to reassure himself, if we have a television? Everyone else has one too. So what if the bookshelf contains untouched classics and well-thumbed paperbacks? So does everyone else’s. Driving home from work, he no longer notices the clichéd structure of his house, or its garish surroundings: “The house looked very neat and white as it emerged through the green and yellow leaves; it wasn’t such a bad house after all . . . a place where everything, in the final analysis, was going to be all right” (Yates 274).

Unlike her husband, April Wheeler cannot share in this sense of complacency. She, too, remains guilty of taking the beaten path; however, as the novel progresses, she

begins to recognize her weakness, rebelling against it. Unfortunately, April's hesitation hampers her strength of character; she does not hold the necessary self-confidence to leave suburban conventions behind and strike out on her own. This ever-present self-doubt becomes clear during her first appearance in the novel, on stage at the school gymnasium: "Sometimes I can feel as if I were sparkling all over," she recites, "and I want to go out and do something that's absolutely crazy, and marvelous" (Yates 8). For a brief moment, April draws in the audience, as well as Yates' readers; she appears to be exceptional, marvelous even. This shining moment quickly fades, however, as reality shatters the illusion: "Before the end of the first act the audience could tell as well as the Players that she'd lost her grip, and soon they were embarrassed for her" (Yates 9). Despite her best efforts, April Wheeler cannot convince herself, or her audience, she is anything but an aging housewife, performing in community theater at the local high school.

Unable to take responsibility for her own actions, April blames Frank for the way her life has turned out, for the fact that the only convincing role she now knows how to play is that of an increasingly bitter housewife. Driving home from the gymnasium, Frank attempts to defend himself, stating a bald truth or two: "It strikes me that there's a considerable amount of bullshit going on here. . . . It's sure as hell not my fault you didn't turn out to be an actress, and the sooner you get over *that* little piece of soap opera the better off we're all going to be" (Yates 25). April's battered ego cannot take such honesty; their fight spills outside as she flees from the car, insisting that Frank holds her "safely in a trap" (Yates 27). In reality, April's trap, her role as a suburban wife and

mother, remains one of her own devising, one sprung years ago in a few moments of weakness.

Conflicted in her love for Frank, April chooses to marry him anyway, not out of passion but out of practicality: “Even on the level of practical advantage it must have held an undeniable appeal: it freed her from the gritty round of disappointment she would otherwise have faced as an only mildly talented, mildly enthusiastic graduate of dramatic school” (Yates 48). Often unhappy, she informs Frank she’s leaving him numerous times, only to discover the emptiness behind her threats. When an unplanned pregnancy occurs, threatening to ruin all of their noble plans of finding themselves and refusing to settle down, she immediately plans on a home abortion: “Frank, listen. Try not to start talking until I finish, and just listen.’ And in an oddly stifled voice, as if she’d rehearsed her speech several times . . . she told him of a girl in dramatic school who knew . . . an absolutely infallible way to induce a miscarriage” (Yates 49). Like her performance years later, withering onstage at the school gymnasium, April’s monologue convinces no one, not even herself. The next morning she falls into Frank’s arms, crying, and admits defeat: “I know you’re right. . . . We’ll name it Frank and we’ll send it to college and everything” (Yates 50).

This defeatism continues for many years, through the birth of multiple children and a move to the suburbs; even her choice of houses reflects this attitude: “Yes, I think it’s sort of – nice, don’t you, darling? Of course it does have that picture window; I guess there’s no escaping that” (Yates 29). The picture window represents more than the cookie-cutter architecture of the time period; staring back at April “like a big black mirror,” it reflects her submission, her acceptance of a settled, unfulfilling future (Yates

29). The morning following her disastrous return to the stage, Frank watches April from behind this window, determinedly mowing the lawn: “Everything about her seemed determined to prove, with a new, flat-footed emphasis, that a sensible, middle-class housewife was all she had ever wanted to be” (Yates 43).

Eventually, however, as her husband settles into the role of a sensible, middle-class husband, taking secret pleasure in the fixed, meaningless routine of daily life, April begins to revolt against such a future. Ambushing Frank with brandy and pot roast, she unveils a revelation to him:

I remember looking at you and thinking “God, if only he’d stop talking.” Because everything you said was based on this great premise of ours that we’re somehow very special and superior to the whole thing, and I wanted to say “But we’re not! Look at us! We *are* the people you’re talking about!” . . . How did we ever get *into* this strange little dream world of the Donaldsons and the Cramers and the Wingates. . . . And it suddenly began to dawn on me . . . that it’s my fault. It’s always been my fault. (Yates 110-1).

This moment of clarity marks the pinnacle of April’s existence. For the first time, she begins to see her life honestly; neither Frank nor her environment is wholly responsible for her stilted life. Instead, her weakness holds part of the blame, as well as her pride; while believing she somehow remains superior to her suburban counterparts, she has at the same time allowed herself to succumb to the comforts and security of their lifestyle. As Bailey explains, “The suburbs (or American culture at large) are not, then, a mass of malign external forces that combine to thwart the Wheeler’s dreams; rather the Wheelers

– in all their weakness and preposterous self-defeat – are themselves definitive figures of that culture” (232).

Finally realizing this, April takes responsibility for the role which she has been playing for the past few years. Like Rachel Shepard, who, deprived of human contact and lusting for the mass-media produced image of the perfect family, views her life through a movie screen filter, April recognizes her own retreat into a world of play-acting: “My God, I’ve even gone so far as to work up this completely corny, soap-opera picture of myself. . . . This picture of myself as the girl who could have been The Actress. . . . And I mean you know perfectly well that I never was any kind of actress and never wanted to be” (Yates 112). Facing up to her escapism, April launches a bold plan of attack, or rather, of retreat: a permanent move to Europe.

While Frank reluctantly agrees to the plan, the reality of the move fails to sink in to him; while he enjoys picturing himself as the sort of man who would drop everything and move to Paris, in actuality the idea of doing so terrifies him. April, on the other hand, views the plan for what it is: her final hope of escaping a lifetime of suburban housewife drudgery. “I’d like to get started on it right away,” she informs Frank. “Tomorrow. Writing letters and whatnot, and seeing about the passports” (Yates 116). While her husband assumes that she spends her days lazily, as he does, absent-mindedly turning over visions of Parisian success in his head, April buckles down to completing the practicalities of the move: filling out job applications, making passport arrangements, obtaining travel brochures and dictionaries. “It’s sort of invigorating,” she explains. “Do you realize how long it’s been since I spent a day in town?” (Yates 133). Even the preparations for the move allow April more freedom than she has experienced in years,



providing a temporary escape from the placelessness of the suburbs. As her husband grows more and more uneasy, unwilling to leave behind the familiarity of the commonplace, April grows increasingly impatient to be off, apparently steadfast in her decision. The unexpected news of another pregnancy throws a wrench into her plan, however, providing Frank with a coward's way out and exposing April's ultimate lack of independence.

Arriving home one evening, Frank finds his wife "pacing the kitchen in the same tense, high-shouldered way she had paced the stage in the second act of *The Petrified Forest*" (Yates 206). In a moment of weakness, April retreats into play-acting, a definitive sign that she has, despite her best efforts to avoid it, assimilated into the culture which surrounds her. Frightened, angry, and unsure of how to act, she adapts the media's portrayal of a woman in crisis, rather than behaving naturally. Frank, on the other hand, cannot repress his natural, joyous reaction to her news: "His face obediently paled and gaped into the look of a man stunned by bad news, but he knew he wouldn't be able to keep it that way for long: an exultant smile was already struggling up for freedom" (Yates 206).

For the second time, the Wheelers find themselves facing an unwanted pregnancy; April cannot bear to have the child because it will trap her in suburbia, while Frank, in spite of his ambivalence, cannot bear to let his opportunity of saving face slip away. The couple remains at an impasse, with four weeks left to decide their course of action. April, of course, has already ostensibly made her decision, fleeing directly from the doctor's office to the drug store. Realizing the degree to which April believes herself committed to the Paris move, Frank attempts to sway with any means necessary, namely by trying to

convince her that staying in Connecticut would not necessarily mean sinking back into their mundane, conformist lives:

They had as many evenings-out in two weeks as they'd had in the whole previous year. . . . The visits to town and country restaurants were helpful in this connection; she had only to glance around her in such places to discover a world of handsome, graceful, unquestionably worthwhile men and women who had somehow managed to transcend their environment – people who had turned dull jobs to their own advantage, who had exploited the system without knuckling under to it. (Yates 216-7).

Despite Frank's attempts to convince her otherwise, April still believes in the overwhelming meaninglessness of such an existence. As Frank's courtship continues, she begins to recognize that one cannot compromise one's values; either the suburban wasteland must be abandoned entirely, or one must admit no special providence applies to them, that their sense of superiority remains just that: a vague sense, and not a reality. Either way, there is no half-way point; one either acts, or submits. April can either choose to abort the baby, and make her way in the world, or she can choose to have the baby and settle down in suburbia, perhaps even happily, but always with the knowledge of her own un-extraordinary nature.

Ultimately, this mundane nature decides her fate. There begins to be a "slight embarrassed hesitation" in her voice and a "distinct averting of her eyes" whenever she speaks of the abortion (Yates 218). At odd moment, Frank finds her "covertly watching him through a mist of romantic admiration" (Yates 218). He woos her with tricks gleaned from film and television: holding his head unnaturally erect, arranging his

features into an attractive scowl before lighting a cigarette, and carrying his inside shoulder an inch or two higher to appear taller. Although these actions bring about “a certain distaste with himself for having to resort to such methods,” he also finds himself judging her for “being so easily swayed by them” (Yates 219). This passage suggests Frank, at some level, recognizes the weakness or flaws in his wife’s behavior; despite all of her talk, and all of her threats, she is just as susceptible to the insidiousness of American culture.

And yet, despite April’s slow capitulation to Frank, there arise moments in which the reality of her life nearly causes her to change her mind. Certain rooms, such as the kitchen and the living room, contain too many tangible reminders of what their life would truly entail if they stayed in Connecticut: dirty dishes, old magazines, a blaring television set, stained furniture, and overflowing ashtrays. “[Frank] had learned early in the courtship, or the campaign, that this room was the worst possible place for getting his points across. All the objects revealed in the merciless stare of its hundred-watt light bulbs seemed to support her argument” (Yates 221). In the end, however, April does not possess the strength to continue fighting; it is easier simply to give in.

The moment of April’s surrender marks a turning point for both of the Wheelers. Agreeing to abandon her plan and carry Frank’s baby to term, April falls into depression and uncertainty, unsure of herself or her place in the world. When she calls Mrs. Givings to take her house off the market, her voice sounds “small and very far away” (Yates 240), while out with the Campbells she is “aloof and enigmatic . . . as far away from the party as she’d ever been” (Yates 249). Even after a one-night-stand with Shep Campbell, she remains unable to forge any sense of connection, to him or to herself: “I really don’t

know who you are . . . and even if I did I'm afraid it wouldn't help, because you see I don't know who I am either" (Yates 262). All of her adult life, April has clung to notion of her superiority to her surroundings, of some essential core within her which separates her from her neighbors. Having at last realized the falseness of this, acknowledging her essential weakness and self-doubt, April no longer holds a clear notion of identity. Unable to face the rest of her life as a "tired, competent housewife," yet unable to blame anyone else for her own inadequacies, April decides to take one last, desperate stand: performing a home abortion which she realizes will almost certainly kill her (Yates 278).

Meanwhile, Frank, no longer required to sham moral outrage at April's actions or to mourn the loss of their Parisian plan, for the first time truly begins to accept his own nature, realizing his happiness lies not in adventure, but in routine: "You mean to say it's Friday already?" he was apt to demand on what he'd thought was Tuesday or Wednesday" (Yates 243). Even the seasons begin to slip away from him; only passing a store window featuring a back-to-school display causes him to notice the end of summer. "Very soon now it would be time for topcoats, and then it would be Christmas" (Yates 243). Frank spends his days flowing easily from one non-place to another, unable to really distinguish between them anymore. He begins staying late in the city, having dinner alone and taking walks around the town, allowing personal connections to fade away.

After all the trouble he has gone through convincing April to stay with him and have his child, he can no longer be bothered with her: "Was his wife unhappy? That was unfortunate, but it was, after all, her problem" (Yates 249). Her decision has set him free. No longer must he pretend displeasure with his current life; instead, he now possesses the

freedom to enjoy the guilty pleasures of conformity: “This crisp way of thinking, unencumbered by guilt and confusion, was as new and as comfortable as his lightweight autumn suit (a wool gabardine in a pleasingly dark shade of tan, a younger and more tasteful, junior-executive version of the suit Bart Pollock wore)” (Yates 249-50). As Frank settles himself firmly in the world of middle-class ambitions, his snobbishness and sense of superiority began to fall away; the pleasure once reserved for blasting the consumerism of a “drugged and dying culture” has been replaced with the pleasure brought about by the purchase of a new wool gabardine suit (Yates 60).

No longer concerned with the state of the rest of the world, Frank allows himself to “dwell only on good things,” or at least his newly-defined order of good things: “the beauty of the day, the finished job of work on Pollock’s desk, the three thousand a year, even the ‘shakedown conference’ that was scheduled for tomorrow morning. It hadn’t been such a bad summer after all” (Yates 273-4). Blissfully unaware of April’s intentions, Frank spends his last morning with her explaining the details of his new job. “I guess it *is* sort of interesting, in a way,” he finds himself telling her, apparently having forgotten the years of describing his work as the most deadly, dull job in the world (Yates 298). With April’s death, Frank’s last remaining tie beyond a world of placelessness, mundane routine, and conformity becomes severed. At the novel’s close, the reader sees the result of this severance: Frank becomes a “walking, talking, smiling, lifeless man,” content to rattle on about his therapist and talk about his “half-assed job” (Yates 330, 331).

## *Disturbing the Peace*

*Disturbing the Peace* continues the work of *Cold Spring Harbor* and *Revolutionary Road*, chronicling the gradual downfall of protagonist John Wilder. A solidly middle-class businessman with a comfortable home, loving family, steady job, and a small place in the country, his life represents the embodiment of the suburban ideal: “moderation, conformity, and the pursuit of happiness via a plot of land” (Cullen 155). Like the characters in Yates’ earlier novels, however, John believes he deserves more, that somewhere in him remains untapped “greatness.” Unlike Frank Wheeler, who possesses neither a clear vision of what such greatness entails or the courage to pursue it, John dreams of becoming a movie producer, abandoning his former life to move to Hollywood. Although he possesses more strength of character than Frank demonstrates, he, like the Wheelers, can ultimately not prevail against an increasingly placeless environment which fosters submission and mediocrity. As he maneuvers through a seemingly-endless landscape of non-places, attempting to prove his greatness, he begins to buckle under the weight of such an environment. As the novel progresses, the link between sense of place and sense of self becomes overwhelmingly clear: denied a sense of home or permanence, John’s identity remains too unstable to provide him with the autonomy needed to stand apart from the crowd. The novel’s close finds him resigned to life in an institution, all traces of his former self lost.

The first scene of the novel foreshadows this eventual deterioration. Yates introduces him via his wife, Janice, who he describes as a placid, satisfied woman who enjoys “the orderly rotation of her days” and “her high, bright apartment” (Yates 1). He elaborates on “her” apartment: “It was neither a rich nor an elegant apartment, but it was

comfortable – and ‘comfortable’ was one of Janet Wilder’s favorite words” (Yates 1). As the reader soon learns, while John may share his home with Janice, he fails to share in her sense of contentment; his home instead provokes a sense of isolation or separation. As he later explains to his therapist, “I was thinking about the books we have at home. There must be four, five thousand books – I’m not exaggerating – and maybe twenty of them are mine. All the rest are my wife’s” (Yates 87). John fails to connect to his own home; instead, he sees the apartment as “Janice’s.” This inability to feel “at home” marks the degree to which he has already merged with the world of non-place.

This assimilation becomes abundantly clear as John himself is introduced to the text, returning to New York after a week-long business trip. He moves from the anonymous hotel rooms and conference halls of Chicago to the “son of a bitch” LaGuardia airport, ending finally in “some kind of stand-up phone booth” (Yates 2). As Janice begs him for his exact whereabouts, his response portrays the subtle danger of non-places: “My legs are about to – Grand Central. The Biltmore. No, wait: the Commodore. I’m having a drink at the Commodore” (Yates 2). As Relph explains, “Placelessness comprises look-alike landscapes . . . Places not only look alike but feel alike” (90). A dark bar is a dark bar is a dark bar. A phone booth is a phone booth is a phone booth; John no longer possesses the ability to separate one from another.

From the Commodore, he drunkenly informs his wife he won’t be coming home: “God damn it, aren’t you listening? I just got through telling you I *can’t* come home” (Yates 2). On the one hand, his words can be taken literally; he can never go home because home does not exist for him. Instead there remains only “Janice’s apartment.” On the other hand, John’s words reflect an epiphany similar to April Wheeler’s, a

realization that even if he could go home, he doesn't want to. A week of drunken insomnia has caused him to reconsider his life; as he explains to his friend Paul Borg, "You know something? I learned a lot about myself. Sometimes when you can't sleep you figure things out; I did, anyway. Hell of a lot of things" (Yates 7). After years of half-realized boredom and discontent, John finally begins to rebel against the routine and sedation and "dandy little chicken-noodle casserole[s]" which comprise his life (Yates 8). "I've been a turd under everybody's feet all my life and I've just now figured out there's greatness in me," he rants to Borg. "There's greatness in me" (Yates 12).

The force of his epiphany eventually causes him to spin out of control, and he finds himself strapped down in an ambulance on his way to a hospital. As Borg clutches his suitcase between his legs, John continues to rage against his surroundings: "Wilder lay on his belly with the hands of three or four attendants holding him down, and he was still shouting in a monologue so nearly incoherent that only the words 'fuck' and 'shit' and 'greatness' came through" (Yates 13). Before he can explore this newly-discovered vein of greatness, however, he finds himself committed to Bellevue hospital, an institution so vast and placeless it holds the ability to temporarily erase one's identity: "Bellevue - or whatever part of the labyrinth of Bellvue they arrived at - was so bewildering that Borg's own mind went briefly out of focus" (Yates 13). The hospital disorients and weakens even Borg with its complexity; John, who spends nearly a week in the institution, will lose, for a time at least, all suspicion of his hidden greatness, returning unhappily to the routines of his previous life.

Entering into the chaos of Bellevue's system, his individuality immediately disappears: "A third orderly waited with a wheelchair, and they not only forced him into



it but strapped him in. . . . Across the back of the chair was the stenciled word PSYCHO” (Yates 14). Against his will, John’s entire identity submerges beneath a single concept; he becomes just another nameless psycho. A doctor emphasizes the extent of his transformation, assuring Borg “he’ll be treated like any other patient” (Yates 15). He experiences this treatment firsthand the next morning, awakening to find himself on “a steel-framed bunk slung by chains from the wall” (Yates 16). He equates Bellevue with a troopship or a jail, both institutions where one identifies oneself by number, not name. Glancing down, he discovers a “loose plastic bracelet” on his wrist, similarly identifying himself (Yates 16). At times, John loses his connection with reality: “Where’re my clothes? Where’s my money? Where’s a phone? What’s the *deal* here?” (Yates 17). At other times, he remains perfectly conscious of his whereabouts: “You come in last night?” ‘Yes.’ ‘Half these poor bastards don’t even know where they are. You know where you are?’ ‘Bellevue’” (Yates 27).

Finally released from the institution, John continues to feel estranged from his surroundings, even after leaving the psychiatric ward. He spends his days drinking bourbon and looking out the windows of his apartment, “blinking in bewilderment among the shelves upon shelves of tightly packed books” (Yates 60). A quick vacation at their country bungalow only fills him with anxiousness: “The best and most bracing part of the country was getting there: the trip across the George Washington Bridge and the long pastoral ride up the divided highway. As with certain other family pleasures, expectation topped fulfillment” (Yates 59). He remains a stranger to his wife and son, unable to spend time with them without a vague, ever-present feeling of discomfort. His time in Bellevue has erased any insight into his life which occurred during his business trip,

destroying the brief clarity of mind which allowed him to identify the source of his discomfort. Now, attempting to return to his old routines, he feels displaced, unable to recognize the source of his unease; his dreams of greatness temporarily forgotten, his mundane, average existence fills him with nameless anxiety.

A few days into their vacation, John cuts the trip short. His desire to return to the city reflects not only the depths of his discomfort, but his need to return to the world of non-places. Unlike at his country home, where he must at least *attempt* to relate to his wife and child, he understands the solitary nature of non-places. He realizes the placelessness of his office building, comparing his work day to his stay in the psychiatric ward:

The office was better than Bellevue. Its walls were white and its light indirect; it contained women as well as men; everybody wore clothes and nobody pleaded to be saved or screamed or masturbated or kicked at windows – even so, there were signs of mounting desperation in every face as the day wore on, and the arrival of five o’clock was like the cop’s signal to unlock the big front door. (Yates 71)

As Relph explains, non-places such as offices, “are seen only in terms of more or less useful features” (82). The carefully constructed atmosphere of office buildings create a daily routine where workers merely interact, never connect. Although he understands the isolating nature of such non-places, John finds comfort in the familiar drudgery; he would rather be one of a hundred anonymous strangers than continue to feel like an outsider in his own home.

Unable to form a sense of place or self in his home life, he finds reassurance in the inevitable routine of his office. At the same time, in an attempt to dull his ever-

present sense of anxiety and disappointment, he increasingly turns to the aid of alcohol. Ironically, his therapist-mandated attendance of Alcoholics Anonymous meetings only heightens his sense of estrangement. As the very name suggests, AA represents another space in which identity and individuality count for nothing, where last names fail to even exist. Similar to his behavior at his office, John desires nothing more than to blend in with the other members, avoiding interaction with them. After several meetings, however, his turn to address the group arrives: “Blood beat in his ears all the way to the rostrum, and the voice that addressed the group through hanging veils of smoke didn’t sound like his own at all” (Yates 103-4).

His speech leaves John disgusted: “All that self-pitying shit about Bellevue; all that false humility. I felt like an idiot” (Yates 104). When Janice attempts to reassure him with platitudes (“This isn’t show business, after all”) (Yates 104), his response recalls Augé’s commentary on “encounter, identification, image” (Augé 105). “He almost stopped on the sidewalk to turn her around and shout that it *was* show business – the whole God damn ‘Program’ was show business” (Yates 104). His criticism applies not only to Alcoholics Anonymous, but provides a commentary on his life in general; despite his unhappiness and sense of disappointment, John continues to wake up every morning and play the role of a loving father and husband, providing for his family despite the fact that he loathes his job.

While he remains unwilling to abandon his familiar, if unfulfilling, life, he finds himself taking a mistress in an attempt to distract himself from his unhappiness. His association with Pamela acts as a catalyst, pulling him out of his familiar routines; upon

discovering that she holds a similar interest in making it in Hollywood, she once again sparks his dreams of greatness:

“ . . . One funny thing, though,” she said while he fixed himself a new drink, “I know I can’t act and I don’t photograph well, and I certainly can’t write . . . but I’ve always had this feeling I’d be good at making movies. Good movies.” His drink was made, but he let an extra shot of whiskey slide in over the ice cubes before he looked up into her wide, dead-serious eyes.

“Me too,” he said. (Yates 115).

Before long, he finds himself convinced by Pamela to make a movie about his experiences in Bellevue. Although he attempts to protest that “I’m only a salesman, after all, and I’ve got a family to support,” Pamela finds no difficulty in persuading him to join her: “John, I refuse to let you throw this beautiful idea away just because you’re feeling dumb and middle-class tonight” (Yates 123).

This taunt, perhaps more than anything in his life, causes John to follow Pamela to Marlowe; despite his daily existence, he refuses to believe he is nothing more than a middle-class salesman. For the first time since his initial breakdown, he begins to believe greatness *does* lie somewhere within him. As before, however, his personality cannot stand up to the pressure of this belief: “He was totally free for the first time in more years than he could remember. . . . He was about to return to the girl he loved and to a barnful of men for whom he was ‘the man.’ It was a little too much for the mind and senses to absorb all at once” (Yates 130).

He once again begins to spiral into a nervous breakdown, seeking sanctuary in the only non-place available to him: “The rain came in a cold pelting that drove him to the

nearest shelter – a telephone booth set in a cement block on the grass beside the road” (Yates 150). The word “shelter” implies he views the telephone booth as a safe haven; he enters the non-place with the sense of coming home: “The overhead light came on when he shut the folding door. . . . He had to rest on the little bench and wait for his heart to slow down and his throbbing head to clear” (Yates 150). Though still mentally unhinged, the phone booth provides John with the illusion of sanity: “I know you think I’m crazy but I’m not,” he informs the woman he dials at random. “I’m very, very serious and this is important” (Yates 151).

The next morning, as lucidity returns, he awakens to a cheerful nurse welcoming him to Elizabeth Fanning Hospital. As before, his institutionalization leads to a loss of identity, and he remembers nothing of the past few weeks. When Pamela relates the events leading up to his breakdown, however, he begins to remember bits and pieces, memories that frighten him: “Have you ever dealt with a man who thought he was Christ,” he asks his doctor with trepidation. “Because that’s – that’s what happened to me. At the peak of my – you know, my breakdown – I thought I was turning into some kind of messiah, a second coming of Christ. . . . And I mean I know that’s pretty bad – that’s *crazy*” (Yates 159). For the first time, he begins to wonder about his visions of superiority, questioning whether or not he truly is destined for something more than the average, middle-class life. As before, his breakdown causes him to return to his former routines, retreating into the world of non-place to avoid questioning his existence; if he pretends he never experienced dreams of greatness, he never has to face the reality of his average-ness.

Back in the city, John's estrangement from his home and family grows more pronounced, taking on a sense of unreality: "Was this really happening? Was she sitting there forking meat loaf into her mouth and dabbing at her lips with a napkin? How could any family as unhappy as this put on such a show every night, and how long could it last. . . . It was incredible" (Yates 165). This little family drama demonstrates the insidious effect of the mass-marketed "American Dream," not only on himself, but on Janice. Despite her unhappiness, Janice remains unwilling to give up her "the orderly rotation of her days" and her "comfortable" apartment. Even as they outwardly embody suburban success, Janice and John cannot help seeing the hollowness of it; still, neither one of them can yet force themselves to give up the dream and confront reality.

Once again, he chooses to act a part, continuing to play the loving husband and father. Despite his best efforts, however, he cannot help contemplating his cowardly behavior, recalling a conversation from his childhood: "You're an escapist, Wilder.' That was what his old Latin teacher had said . . . and he remembered it now as he escaped uptown on the subway. . . . 'You're an escapist pure and simple. . . . What's the matter with you, boy? You want to be an escapist all your life?'" (Yates 165). He continues to mull over this memory on his way to visit Pamela:

As the loud dismal cars of the IRT pulled away from Grand Central and there was nothing to do but wait and watch the Bellevue-like faces of passengers across the aisle, he guessed the old Latin teacher had been right after all: he had grown up an escapist; he would be an escapist all his life. (Yates 167).

This realization strikes at the heart of his existence; he spends his life maneuvering through non-places in an attempt to escape his reality. As Augé illustrates, "A foreigner

lost in a country he does not know (a passing stranger) can feel at home there only in the anonymity of motorways, service stations, big stores or hotel chains” (106). Acting the part of a stranger in his own land, John unconsciously flees to these non-places, choosing the rootless, anonymous existence of a perpetual outsider in an attempt to avoid the reality and disappointment of his average existence.

Although he half-heartedly attempts to conform to the prevalent belief that home “is probably where he belongs,” he cannot help feeling trapped: “Janice says I ought to spend more time at home,” he explains to Pamela. “I guess she’s probably right. . . . It’s just – hell, you know. Going home” (Yates 183). As he and Janice continue to play charades, both afraid of what would happen if the game were to stop, their home life becomes more and more unbearable; a dinner with Borg and his wife Natalie sends him nearly to the edge: “There was nothing [Natalie] relished more than a chance to talk about her youthful hysterectomy; and Wilder sat through it all sipping coffee and congratulating himself on his patience” (Yates 187).

John cannot control his mounting frustration or increasing sense of estrangement; despite his best efforts, he grows increasingly disconnected from his family: “He was glad when Tommy labored through summer school with passing marks and rejoined his class in the seventh grade . . . but he couldn’t share in Janice’s sense of triumph” (Yates 190). He views his son as a stranger, someone “sure to grow more and more inscrutable as he moved into adolescence” (Yates 190). Although, on the surface, he continues to live the American Dream, inwardly, his accomplishments afford him no pleasure, only contributing to an ultimately empty lifestyle. He loses interest in the movie he helped to produce, in discussing politics and in his job: “His earnings were almost twice those of

any other salesman . . . but it gave him no pleasure” (Yates 191). His feeling of utter isolation reaches a head with the news of JFK’s murder: “Through it all Wilder sat numb, saying very little, wondering what was the matter with him” (Yates 196).

As John’s feelings of isolation reach their peak, he once again teeters on the edge of a breakdown. Overwhelmed with the emptiness of his life, the disappointment of his job, and his estrangement from his family, he finally (with the promptings of Pamela) makes the bold decision to change his life and move to Hollywood. As he breaks the news to George Taylor, his boss unwittingly places his finger on the exact problem with his plan: “John, a man doesn’t spend all these years building something and then kick it to pieces. What about Janice, for God’s sake? What about your boy? . . . The point is a man needs a *home*, for God’s sake” (Yates 201). Despite Taylor’s protests, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with John’s desire to make a new life for himself, even one that does not conform to the standards of the time. Where his problem lies, however, is in the fact that he does not possess the autonomy or unshakeable sense of self needed to find greatness, to rise above an average, mundane existence; having led a rootless existence for so long, feeling more comfortable in spaces of placelessness than in his own home, his sense of identity remains shaky at best. He does not possess the strength of character to make it on his own, especially in the overwhelmingly placeless environment of Los Angeles.

Arriving in Hollywood, John and Pamela immediately plunge into a cacophonous riot of non-places, trying to grope their way through the noise and strangeness of the city. Despite his unfamiliarity with it, he understands the nature of Los Angeles: “All he knew about this city, from two brief business conventions, was that it wasn’t really a city at all.



It went on for miles in all directions without ever becoming a city” (Yates 204). Los Angeles represents the pinnacle of placelessness, what Relph calls a subtopia:

[Subtopia is] the mindless mixing up of all man-made objects without any pattern or purpose or relationship – endless subdivisions of identical houses, commercial strip developments, shopping plazas – set of apparently randomly located points and areas, each of which serves a single purpose and each of which is isolated from its setting, linked only by roads which are themselves isolated from the surrounding townscape except for the adjacent strips of other-directed buildings.

(109)

This jumble of non-places creates an overwhelming haze of confusion: “The Los Angeles airport was so bewildering that Pamela was almost in tears by the time he steered their rented car into the maze of Freeways” (Yates 204). Arriving at a motel, the pair collapses in relief.

The couple’s first order of business involves finding an apartment: “It took them four [days], and the place they found wasn’t very rewarding. . . . It was habitable . . . but the whole place looked as impersonal and transient as a motel suite” (Yates 205). John, tellingly, feels comfortable in this impersonal surrounding: “Hell, it’s only temporary,” he tells Pamela. “We’ll find a better place once we know our way around. Besides, it’s cheap and convenient. . . . That’s all we need for now” (Yates 205). Pamela also recognizes the transient nature of their lives: “I’m so glad we didn’t get involved in a two-year lease . . . or anything like that” (Yates 205). Lacking anything better to do, he and Pamela spend their days exploring downtown Los Angeles and “the enormous

suburban waste of the San Fernando Valley,” impatiently waiting for their careers to begin (Yates 211).

Unsurprisingly, the wait is longer than suspected, and John, already succumbing to the stress of their environment, grows impatient and irrational. The greatness to which he believes he is entitled fails to manifest itself; instead, his life begins to crumble. As a washed-up producer, elaborating on his ideas for their Bellevue movie, fleshes out the “character” of Wilder, John himself discovers his life, contrary to being extraordinary, can be summed up in a handful of clichés: “He’s unhappily married and he’s got kids he can’t relate to and he feels trapped. He’s solidly middle-class. I don’t know what he does for a living, but let’s say it’s something well-paid and essentially meaningless, like advertising. . . . The seeds of self-destruction are there in the man from the start” (Yates 220). Leaving a script meeting, shaken to the core, he picks a fight with Pamela over an ex-boyfriend: “Go shack up with Chester Pratt again! Get him together with Munchin and the three of you can make a movie about *me*! Oh, I’m a Dark Character, all right, baby; I’m Doomed; I’ve got the fucking Seeds of Self-Destruction coming out my *ears*” (Yates 222). Although he speaks sarcastically, the words contain the ring of truth. Through no fault of his own, John *is* doomed; as Bailey bluntly explains, “Wilder is one of life’s losers, and obnoxiously bitter about it” (444).

Pamela walks away, leaving him with “nothing to do but turn and walk in the opposite direction, fast, in search of a bar to hide in” (Yates 222). As usual, in times of stress, he turns to the familiarity of non-places, seeking escape and anonymity. He staggers home drunkenly with the intention of sleep but finds himself sitting on the living room sofa, “awake and whispering to himself . . . as daylight [creeps] through the

Venetian blinds” (Yates 223). This whispering signals the beginning of his final and permanent mental breakdown. Recognizing the signs, Pamela moves out. Left alone, John loses all sense of perspective. On the third day, “things [begin] to close in” (Yates 237). He phones his L.A. psychiatrist, only to discover he has called many times before. When the psychiatrist offers to admit him into the ward, he responds with horror: “Oh, *Jesus*, no, that’s not what I want” (Yates 241). As long as he remains outside of institutions, he still possesses the chance to find a sense of purpose or place. In an institution, however, no such possibilities exist; he will be trapped forever in anonymity, never having achieved greatness.

Terrified of returning to a mental institution, John awakens in the middle of the night, frantic: “He had to act quickly. He pulled on his pants and zipped them up but there wasn’t time for any more clothes; he was out in the dead, deserted street and running barefoot. . . . There was a sidewalk phone booth two blocks away; he sprinted for it, clambered inside and grabbed the receiver off the hook” (Yates 250). Once again, he returns to non-places in time of crisis, seeking the safety of a phone booth. At the height of his breakdown, he succumbs to the inevitable delusion of greatness: “Once he stumbled and went down on one hand, and his thumb picked up a trace of dogshit. . . . The smell soon became his sole proof that he was mortal and earthbound – only a man. No second coming of Christ would have dogshit on his thumb” (Yates 151).

In the morning, he finds himself taken by force to the El Dorado mental hospital. When Pamela visits a few days later, John raises a sense of revulsion in her: “He was clean and freshly shaved, but his shining, protruding eyes looked – well, crazy – and the effort of singing had left a trickle of saliva from one corner of his expressionless mouth”

(Yates 266). After only a few days of institutional life, his identity has already broken down. No signs of individuality remain to mark him as his self; even to his lover, his eyes appear merely “crazy” and his mouth “expressionless.”

Years later, at the novel’s close, Janice arrives in L.A. to visit her former husband. She fails to recognize John when he appears in the visiting room: “A short, grey-haired man in green came out, and she didn’t recognize him until he drew a chair out from her table. . . . It was only that he’d turned grey; his face had gone slack and his eyes bland. He looked like a middle-aged man to whom nothing had ever happened” (Yates 276-7). Ironically, such a description could also be applied to Janice’s new husband, Paul Borg, who has spent the past decade living out the American Dream.

Wilder’s slack face and bland eyes demonstrate the degree to which institutional life has changed him. Janice does not recognize her former husband because the man sitting before her is no longer John Wilder; he is nobody. As Gabriel Marcel observes, “An individual is not distinct from his place; he is that place” (130). The years spent in an institutional non-place have turned him into a non-person. John accepts these consequences. Janice, who lives in a world of meaningful places, cannot:

She knew her next question would be a difficult one, but she decided to ask it anyway. She might never be in California again; she might never see him again. She had to wait for the swelling in her throat to go down before she could trust her voice. “John,” she said, “have you made any plans or – you know – given any thought to what you might do when you leave here?”

He looked puzzled, as if she had asked him a riddle. “Leave here?” (Yates 278)

Wilder's strength of character led him to the coast in search of greatness. This character no longer exists; institutional life has completely eradicated all traces of individualism or motivation. Like Frank Wheeler, Wilder has completely assimilated to the very situation which he once feared the most; he remains trapped in an institution, the ultimate non-place, a completely average, unremarkable man.

As one of Yates' final novels, *Disturbing the Peace* demonstrates the power and reach of the culture of suburbanization; despite Wilder's strength of character and determination, he still finds himself unable to make a mark on the world. He feels the effects of an increasingly placeless world, unable to form a sense of place or attachment, and thus, a clear sense of identity. Without this strong, unwavering sense of self, he finds himself unable to fight the homogenizing nature of placelessness, and his self-doubt ultimately leads to his institutionalization. Through Wilder, Yates shows that to succeed in a culture of suburbanization, one must possess the power of absolute autonomy. The urge to assimilate can be fought, but it remains the rare individual who possesses the strength to do so. Despite his talent, Yates was not one of these individuals; neither, as his novels show, are his characters.

## Conclusion

In the acknowledgments section of his novella, *Women With Men*, Richard Ford acknowledges Yates' writing: "I wish to record my debt of gratitude to the stories and novels of Richard Yates, a writer too little appreciated" (O'Nan 48). At the time of his death in 1992, Yates' novels had fallen out of favor and out of print. Respected by contemporaries, such as Kurt Vonnegut and Robert Stone, and revered by former students, such as Andre Dubus and Tobias Wolff, Yates' found little appreciation from wider audiences during his lifetime. Though his novels and stories, *Revolutionary Road* in particular, continued to garner favorable reviews, not one of his hardcover books ever sold more than 12,000 copies (Bailey 577).

The themes of suburbanization, disillusionment, and loneliness which run throughout almost all of Yates' works are in no way unique to the time period in which the author was writing. As Bailey theorizes, "The book's artistic merit is lost on [those] who tend to regard it as 'merely' another novel about the suburbs" (230). Yates' use of common themes may partially explain his reader's ambivalence; then again, perhaps his treatment of these themes were simply too good. Stewart O'Nan explains:

What is distinctive about Yates . . . is not merely the bleakness of his vision, but how that vision adheres not to war or some other horror but to the aspirations of everyday Americans. We share the dreams and fears of his people—love and success balanced by loneliness and failure—and more often than not, life, as defined by the shining paradigms of advertising and popular song, is less than kind to us. Yates proves this with absolutely plausible drama, then demands that

his characters—and we, as readers, perhaps the country as a whole—admit the simple, painful truth. (53)

Reading Yates is not a comfortable experience, after all. Too often his characters strike a chord within his readers, forcing them to examine their own lives or face harsh realities.

The novels do not end happily; they contain no neat resolutions or revelations. As the author himself often remarked, “The hell with reader’s sympathies” (Bailey 553).

In his biography of Yates, Bailey addresses this attitude: “In a nutshell, [Yates’ comment] may explain why . . . Yates’ books keep going out of print. To repeat the obvious, most people don’t like reading about, much less identifying with, mediocre people who evade the truth until it rolls over them” (553).

And yet, despite the discomfort which his novels evoke, Yates’ place in the literary canon cannot be denied. In 2000, nine years after his tragic death (hospitalized for treatment of emphysema, Yates experienced a choking fit and died alone on the hospital floor), Random House resurrected the author with a new publication of *Revolutionary Road*. Richard Ford wrote the introduction, describing the novel as “a cultish standard,” especially among writers “who have kept its reputation burnished by praising it, teaching it, [and] sometimes unwittingly emulating its apparent effortlessness” (viii). With this new publication, for the first time Yates began to step into the public eye, away from his reputation as a “writer’s writer.” In 2001, the novel was listed by the Harvard Book Store as one of the “100 Favorite Titles” among college students (Bailey 612). New editions of *The Easter Parade*, *A Good School*, and *A Special Providence* quickly followed the re-release of Yates’ first novel. Currently, a film version of

*Revolutionary Road* is being filmed, starring Oscar winners Kate Winslet and Leonardo DiCaprio.

One can only speculate what Yates would have felt upon learning that his favorite novel was being turned into a Hollywood blockbuster. On the one hand, he hated everything to do with Los Angeles, a place he considered “cheap,” “vulgar,” and “lousy.” On the other hand, he considered *Revolutionary Road* his finest novel, bemoaning its lack of success years after its publication:

In my more arrogant or petulant moments, I still think *Revolutionary Road* ought to be famous. I was sore as hell when it first went out of print, and when Norman Podhoretz made a very small reference to it in his book several years ago as an “unfairly neglected novel,” I wanted every reader in America to stand up and cheer. But of course deep down I know that kind of thing is nonsense.

(*Ploughshares* 74).

Much like his characters, Yates latent “greatness” never emerged, at least in his eyes, during his lifetime. His desire to prove himself by becoming a famous author never happened; instead, he was forced to watch his novels and stories fall out of print and largely out of mind.

One month before his death, he called his closest friend, or at least his closest acquaintance, Bob Lacy, and asked him if he’d like to know what he, Yates, had done the night before: “Get this. . . . I got smashed last night, and then you know what I did? I sat here on this couch in my lousy apartment reading the first chapter of *Revolutionary Road* out loud to myself and crying like a baby. . . . Tears running down my cheeks. Can you believe that?” (Bailey 600). In the end, despite his talent, Yates believed himself a



failure. Unfortunately, it is only after his death, with the reissuing of his work, that Yates' opinion is proven wrong.

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